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SUBJECT: AFTER THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL: BARROSO HEADING TOWARD SECOND
TERM AT COMMISSION'S HELM

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11. (U) SUMMARY. Last week's European Council meeting appears to have been fruitful for Jose Manuel Barroso. Contacts among the EU leaders seemed to have helped Barroso regain what may prove decisive momentum in his campaign to be reappointed President of the EU Commission. His current five-year term is due to expire at the end of October 2009. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) At a March 19 gathering in Brussels ahead of the European Council, political leaders belonging to national parties affiliated with the European People's Party (EPP) gave a new boost to Barroso's candidacy. EPP President Wilfried Martens told reporters that "Mr. Barroso has a broad appeal in all the main political families and is by far the best candidate for this position..." (Note: Neither Sarkozy nor his Prime Minister Francois Fillon, whose name has been mentioned in some circles as a possible alternative to Barroso, attended the EPP meeting on Thursday. End Note).

13. (U) A rival gathering of the European Socialist leaders on March 19 failed to agree on a possible left-wing candidate for the Commission Presidency (the name of former Danish Social-Democrat PM Poul Nyrup Rasmussen had been mentioned in that respect). Consensus among Socialist/Social-Democrats proved impossible as some of their leaders, including UK's Brown, Portugal's Socrates, Spain's Zapatero, have already voiced support for a renewal of Barroso's mandate. Finnish PM Vanhanen (neither EPP nor Socialist) also repeatedly called for a renewal of Barroso's mandate.

14. (U) For its part, the European Parliament made it clear through its President Hans-Gert Poettering on March 19 that it was in favor of EU leaders agreeing on their nominee for the Commission Presidency in June so that Parliament can hold its Treaty-required confirmation vote on the nominee in mid-July. Poettering stressed that the choice of the Commission President "must reflect the outcome of the European elections" and that "for this to happen, consultations between the Council Presidency and the European Parliament will be necessary." Based on the text of his address to EU leaders and his own clarifications at a press conference, Poettering served notice that Parliament would be "willing to conduct consultations with the Presidency (of the EU Council) after the elections and before the June (18-19) meeting of the European Council." Poettering implied that such consultations could happen around June 16-17, taking account of the delay necessary for the newly-elected Parliament to organize itself.

15. (SBU) There was a rumor in last week's European Council corridors that the June 18-19 meeting of the European Council could be postponed for a week. When questioned about it at the final press conference, Czech PM/European Council chair Mirek Topolaneck demurred, noting that the question was "not discussed." As for Poettering's insistence that the leaders should pronounce in June, Topolaneck observed this was not a proposal from Poettering (as the questioner and the EP President implied) but a decision from the December 2008 European Council.

16. (SBU) At the end of 2008, EU leaders actually agreed they would decide on the next Commission President at their June 2009 Summit, shortly after the European elections. However, French President Nicolas Sarkozy cast doubt on this timetable by suggesting earlier this month that the appointment should only be decided upon after another Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, which is set scheduled (but with no precise date) for Fall 2009. (Comment: Sarkozy, who had been forced to adjust the terms of his government's

plan to assist the French car industry in consultations with the Commission last month, appears to have toned down his public backing of the Commission President in the run-up to the Euro-elections, knowing that his political opponents will use the campaign to criticize the policies of the Barroso Commission. End Comment)

17. (SBU) The March 19-20 European Council and side meetings to it appear to have reinforced the utility of choosing a Commission President shortly after the June Euro-elections in order limit political uncertainties about the holders of key EU positions in the middle of a deepening economic crisis. Provided that the EEP group retains its dominant position in the European Parliament elected on June 4-7 (a reasonably safe assumption, according to opinion polls), this plays into the hands of the incumbent and front-runner Barroso.

To be sure, Barroso would like his mandate to be renewed as early as possible instead of seeing his fate hanging on the future of the Lisbon Treaty and a more comprehensive bargaining on nominations to top-level EU jobs to be created under the Lisbon Treaty.

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